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ABSTRACT

Evidence suggests that educational organizations lack internal coordination. This is especially true of the content and methods of what is presumably their central activity--instruction. Instruction tends to be removed from the control of the organizational structure, both in its bureaucratic aspects and in its professional or collegial aspects. Such organizations are "loosely coupled," which means that structure is disconnected from activity, and activity is disconnected from its effects. For instance, there is no technology or program of instruction that is of established or consensual efficacity. Thus, it is difficult even to establish standards of content and procedure in instruction. Despite this lack of coordination, the educational system and its organizations appear to have considerable stability. That is the problem of this paper--to explain how organizations with few controls over their central activity persist so stably, and to explain how implicit coordination is achieved. The explanation takes two forms--a general explanation of how substantive educational activity is coordinated outside of organizational (or professional) forms, and a discussion of the implications of this explanation for the understanding of educational organizations, decision-making, change in educational organizations, and theory of organizations. Areas of needed research are pointed out. (Author/IRT)

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Occasional Paper No. 3

NOTES ON THE STRUCTURE OF EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Introductory Statement

The Center's mission is to improve teaching in American schools. Its work is carried out through three research and development programs--Teaching Effectiveness, The Environment for Teaching, and Teaching and Linguistic Pluralism--and a technical assistance program, the Stanford Urban/Rural Leadership Training Institute. A program of Exploratory and Related Studies includes smaller studies not included in the major programs. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources is also a part of the Center.

This paper, which is part of the work of the Environment for Teaching Program, describes schools as relatively uncoordinated ("loosely coupled") organizations, suggests that social understandings provide a basis for the coordination of school activities, and considers the implications of such social coordination of educational work for organization theory, educational administration, innovation, and future research.

NOTES ON THE STRUCTURE OF EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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There is a great deal of evidence that educational organizations lack internal coordination. This is especially true of the content and methods of what is presumably their central activity--instruction. The main activity tends to be removed from the control of the organizational structure, both in its bureaucratic aspects and in its professional or collegial aspects. This property of educational organizations, among others, has led March (March and Olsen, forthcoming) to apply to them the term "loosely coupled." By this he means that structure is disconnected from activity, and activity is disconnected from its effects.

We can briefly consider some of the specific ways in which educational organizations lack coordination. First, there is no technology, or program of instruction, that is of established or consensual efficacity. Thus it is difficult even to establish standards of content and procedure. Second, there seems to be little authority of office vested in educational administrators to create such standards. Third, there is relatively little sequential interdependence in teaching work. While in the abstract it may seem necessary for sixth graders to have mastered fifth-grade work in order to do their own work properly (or for advanced economics students to have mastered introductory economics), it seems that in the real world those rules are often violated with limited organizational costs. Fourth, educational organizations rarely have measures of their own output or efficacy, or that of their subunits. Thus a crucial mechanism of organizational control is almost

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always missing. Fifth, and more broadly, teaching work is usually not subject to serious evaluation or inspection of any kind, and is not even visible for such inspection (Dornbusch and Scott, 1975). It is common for educational work to take place in the isolation of the classroom, removed from organizational controls of a substantive kind (e.g., Lortie, 1973; Dreeben, 1973; and Bidwell, 1965).[1]

To account for the general situation described above, the myth of the teacher as a professional is sometimes employed. Thus educational activity is seen as controlled by socialized professionals. But there is much evidence that this makes no sense. Teachers are known to have little professional communication among themselves, and professional organizations have little authority in substantive matters. Almost all studies show few effects of professional training either on the content and method of instruction or on instructional success (the evidence is strongest here). Teachers themselves do not believe the myth: in contrast to nurses, they report that their training, as opposed to personality and experience, has little to do with their ability to perform effectively (Dornbusch and Scott, 1975). The myth is of the greatest importance, but it does not contribute to the integration and coordination of educational work.

Despite all this, the educational system and its organizations appear to have considerable stability. And in many ways they give the impression of considerable, although implicit, coordination. Teachers in different classrooms, though isolated, seem to teach many of the same things. And pupils learn many of the same things. This is really our problem: to explain how organizations with few controls over their central activity persist so stably, and to explain how implicit coordination is achieved.

Our explanation of this situation takes two forms: a general explanation of how substantive educational activity is coordinated outside

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[1] Some caveats are needed here: (1) We are discussing American education. Schools observed in Britain show much more internal coordination, evaluation, and control under the authority of headmasters, whose roles in society and school are substantive, substantial, and rooted in established tradition. Some continental educational systems similarly vest substantive power in central ministries. (2) In America, a number of controls are built into state laws. There are no data on how much coordination (and diversity) is achieved at this level.

of organizational (or professional) forms; and a discussion of the implications of this explanation for understanding educational organizations. We then briefly note some implications for decision making and change in educational organizations; some implications for the theory of organizations; and some needed research.

The Social Coordination of Educational Work

Substantive educational work is mainly coordinated in the social environment, not in the organizational structures of schools. There exist general social understandings about (a) what a school is; (b) what a teacher is and does, and what type of teachers there are (e.g., kindergarten teachers, mathematics teachers); (c) what types of students there are (e.g., fifth graders, college students) and what they do and become; and (d) what general cultural categories (e.g., reading, economics) are appropriate objects of educational work. Some of these general social understandings are built into state laws and school rules, but these rules are usually not organizationally enforced, nor is conformity evaluated. Little in the organizational structure makes sure that fifth graders are working on reading or that college economics students are not. The enforcement mechanism is the diffuse social control exercised by the societal system and sometimes the state, not the organizational structure. If any activity violates the most general social expectations, parents, pupils, teachers, or administrators may complain. Participants in the organization may take action, but they often do so in informal ways. They talk to each other as members of a common society rather than as agents of a particular formal structure. The controls are vague and operate through the anticipations of the people involved.

The educational system works because everyone knows everyone else knows roughly what is to go on. Without these general understandings, none of it would make any sense, and the system would collapse out of implausibility. How could parents or the state legitimately extend broad powers over their children to random strange adults? The shared ideas of teacher (and of student), with their implicit assumptions about

what will and will not go on, make this situation make sense. What principal or superintendent, lacking coordinative authority, could assume his responsibilities without similar assumptions about the behavior of others? What sensible person would devote years and money to relatively disorganized (and not always demonstrably useful) study, without an understanding that this is college, and economics (or sociology)?

In this conception of the coordination of educational work, educational organizations are holding companies containing shares of stock in uninspected activities and subunits that are largely given their meaning, reality, and value in the wider social market. They are intervening links between the society that gives meaning and funds to education and the same society that at the microscosmic level gives meaning and control to local classroom activity. Thus colleges, schools, districts, and other such organizations are not organized education; if one defines them this way they appear impossibly disorganized and inept (this is the conventional stance of radical critics of all kinds: educational organizations as fraud). Rather, schools are organizations processing ancillary resources for social activities whose meaning is established and largely controlled elsewhere. They are also organizations for negotiating with the environment the meanings of these activities.

Two immediate, researchable implications follow: (1) If educational content and method are societally defined and controlled, they should vary a great deal between societies. They should vary much less within a given society, no matter how implemented, so long as the same social definitions of what is going on (i.e., this is a college) apply. (2) It may be that actual educational activity varies widely within schools or in society, so long as the constant social definitions and meanings are maintained, with few visible organizational consequences. That is, so long as a school maintains the forms and definitions of elementary schooling, including the the definition of itself, there may be few organizational consequences from whatever actually goes on.

Implications of Social Coordination for the Analysis of Educational Organizations

It makes little sense to see education as a product developed by schools and produced by them for a market. Rather, wider social agreements define certain social activities as education. Organizations are created to house these activities (and the meanings and myths they embody) and to manage ancillary resources.

The myth of education rests on beliefs in certain social realities that must be regulated. Further, some general exigencies of the social and physical world require practical management if the activities of education are to go on. Educational organizations function primarily to manage the social and physical ecology of the central, agreed-on rites of education. On these issues, they are coordinated and controlled organizations--not loosely coupled ones.

These matters of regulation and management have to do with the definition and allocation of the central ingredients of the myth of education: the categories of teacher, pupil, and topic. They also have to do with resources: funds and space. Consider these in turn:

1. There is a detailed, definitive specification of who is and who is not a teacher in a given district, school, and class. Teachers are selected on detailed, recorded properties of background and training about which the organization's rules are precise (though these properties have little demonstrable relation with what the teacher actually does). The organization coordinates the definition of teachers, and the specific assignment of them to each of the other categories: topic (e.g., fifth grade, economics); pupils (class 5b, Intro. to Econ. I); space (Room B); and funds (salary, rights to materials). Many substantive aspects of education are ambiguous and organizationally uncontrolled, as with other myth-enacting activities; correspondingly the social definition of personnel must be extremely rigid. If no one knows what educational activity is, its stable pursuit requires great clarity about who is and who is not doing it.

2. The specification of pupils and their properties (names, ages, previous education) is also controlled and coordinated. Lists are kept

in detail, at the organizational level (e.g., registrar's office). Each pupil must be definitely classified (fifth grader in school X; student enrolled in Econ. I). Changes in classification (e.g., to sixth grader or to college graduate) require coordinated organizational action. Pupils are coordinatively assigned to teachers, topics, space, and sometimes funds. Few mechanisms make sure these assignments are enacted substantively (e.g., that the pupil is actually doing fifth-grade work, or learning economics; or that the graduate actually knows something), but there is great clarity in formal assignment.

3. Similarly, definitive sets of topics are organized (e.g., K-6 grades; a Department of Economics, including Econ. I) and are assigned to pupils, teachers, space, and funds. A school either does or does not contain a particular topic as a formal element: little amoiguity exists. This is not to say the topic is actually substantively enacted in any agreed-on sense (that is, that the fifth graders are actually doing fifth-grade educational work, for example).

4. In the same way, space and funds are organized, coordinated, and definitively assigned to teachers, pupils, and topics.

Thus Econ. I, as an organizational element, has nothing to do with substantive instruction in economics (which would require some sort of organizational definition and control). It is an assembly of a certificated and assigned teacher, a regulated list of students (and of those who have completed the course), a space, and some resources. On those points reasonably close coordination is to be expected, insuring that teachers, pupils, topic, space, and funds are in fact appropriately conjoined.

If this general view is correct, and educational organizations are, in their main purpose, dependent on externally defined meanings and categories, several interesting consequences follow:

1. Educational organizations remain at the minimal level of internal coordinative costs consistent with maintaining the externally defined categories (a suggestion of Professor James March). There is little by way of a technology, and their business is to maintain categories, not activity. Increases in internal coordination bring great costs: conflicts rise, inconsistencies among activities appear, and inconsistencies between categories and actual activity appear.

2. Internal coordination is devoted to those activities which threaten the boundaries of the externally defined categories. Thus ambiguities in the assignment of teachers, pupils, space, etc., lead to immediate organizational action. Absent teachers are immediately replaced, and absent pupils recorded. Teachers or pupils who violate space categories are controlled. (Thus principals' commonly reported concerns about disorderly or noisy instruction represent, not displaced goals or a bureaucratic personality, but persons doing a job which has little to do with substantive education. Similarly, principals' emphasis on such matters and on record-keeping, in teacher evaluation, represent an organizational perspective involving little jurisdiction over education, not a disrespect for education.) Misplaced funds are of immediate concern.

3. Schools devote a great deal of coordinative effort to the environment. They respond quickly to shifts in environmental definitions of categories. Newly invented topic categories which are legitimated in the environment flow rather quickly through the system. New categories of pupils (e.g., the mentally retarded) which attain legitimacy also enter the system. New subcategories of teachers (specialists of various kinds) similarly penetrate the system. Since the system minimizes coordinative costs, however, many of the new categories lose their meaning as they become segmented within the structure. That is, new specialists and new topics do not become interdependent with old ones, but become or remain isolated and segmented in their turn.

4. Organizational efforts at adaptation, change, or success are oriented to environmentally defined categories. Thus a major success is the redefinition of the school as a whole (from junior college to college; from college to university). Others are the creation of new departments and programs conforming to established categories.[2]

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[2]The points made in this section describe a given context: there is nothing inevitable about them. Movements to rationalize substantive educational instruction--i.e., to bring it under the explicit jurisdiction of organizations--arise constantly. They are part of general processes of rationalistic society, but they also arise from the constant rationalizing pressure within educational organizations to "complete" themselves--to incorporate controls over their own activity. Sometimes there are efforts in specific substantive directions, but usually the main thrust is toward rationalized procedure. Thus the current concern with "evaluation research."

Implications for Educational Administration and Change

Enormous amounts of innovative educational activity occur. There is also much activity which is formally defined as "innovation." The two are by no means the same. Administrators often find it useful to organize an activity as innovation, particularly when the environment provides support for a particular redefinition. Often there are intrinsic advantages to "innovation" of whatever content--a system which lives by environmental definitions may prosper by Hawthorne Effects. It is often prestigious, and financially advantageous, to add a new topic (environmental education, history of science), classification of pupils (gifted, mentally retarded), or teacher assignment principle (team teaching, interdepartmental programs). It may matter less whether any actual activity is altered than whether the new program is established. In fact, the principle of minimizing coordinative costs often makes it useful to create a new program with minimal alteration in actual activity.

Thus, "accredited" innovations are those which adapt to (or on rare occasions, produce) redefinitions in the environment. Or they are changes which improve the organization's position within constant environmental definitions. The organization must adapt to changes in external definitions of its components; changes which do not conform to environmentally established social agreements may greatly increase coordinative costs, since suddenly many things cannot be taken for granted.

Some implications of these arguments, which should be verified by research, are:

1. American educational organizations move rapidly into isomorphism with environmentally defined categories. Despite the absence of organizational controls, colleges have remarkably similar programs. So do grade and high schools. The arguments above account for this, and suggest that as the environment changes, particular organizations adapt rapidly. Hence the often-noted faddish or social movement quality of American education.

2. Attempts at change generally conform to accepted environmental categories and are attempts to improve the organization's position within these categories. Thus schools work to get better certified teachers, more able pupils, more space and money, and more fashionable topics (e.g., PhD programs, "innovative" elementary school programs).

3. Decision makers attend to the programmatic definitions of changes (that is, their status in terms of environmentally defined categories) more than to their implications for internal activity. Implications for the coordination of actual internal activity tend to get lost.

4. Decision makers attempt to establish changes as "innovative" in the environment, and to penetrate environmental definitions with internally advantageous changes. Internal changes will only be stable when they acquire environmental definition as legitimate "innovations."

Implications for Organization Theory

Most organizations operate in important respects like schools. Both contain structural links drawn from legitimating assumptions in the wider environment. Some activities are organized around strict technologies; others are controlled by formally delegated authority of office. But no known technology (or verified causal chain) precisely defines the necessary relation of the personnel office to the rest of the firm, and central authorities intervene to regulate its work to a limited extent. The same is true of most of the other structural elements of modern firms (research departments, finance and accounting offices, sales, advertising, and marketing departments). These functions are legitimated within the firm by their legitimation outside it, not by known production functions, and not really by the arbitrary controls of central authorities.

If this is true, the shadow prices of many activities within the firm are established by their social meaning and value outside it. And so with costs: as an activity or function comes to be valued and seen as real in the environment of the firm, the costs in terms of the legitimacy of not incorporating it increase. We have, thus, an argument for the isomorphism of firm and environment that does not depend on technology or on the principle of the maximization of internal functional efficacy. The argument is that at any given time the environment contains a socially defined "functional theory" of the work of the firm. The firm, to maximize its internal and external legitimacy, and thus to utilize wider social forces as parts of or substitutes for its internal control structure, incorporates this "functional theory" in its own structure.

We further have a general explanation of why the formal structures of organizations often correspond poorly with the actual patterns of activity perceived by researchers. The formal structure, we would argue, is a response to formal definitions existing in the environment. The environmental "functional theory" may fit poorly with the organization's actual activity, but must be incorporated in the formal structure. For example, for legal and social propriety, there must be a formal Personnel Department. Who actually does personnel work is an entirely different question.

Research Implications

Throughout the discussion, we have drawn a number of research implications from our argument. A main one, however, requires separate discussion. If educational organizations and activity depend heavily on environmental definitions, research at the level at which these definitions obtain is essential. Clearly, the definitions we are discussing (of teacher, pupil, and topic) are often accepted nationwide. Our educational system, as a myth, is nationwide--we have national categories like fifth grader, high school graduate, college student, economics, college professor, etc.

To study these issues properly, then, comparative research is necessary: (a) we need studies comparing American educational organizations with similar ones in other national contexts; and (b) we need studies more explicitly comparing educational organizations with American organizations operating in other institutional contexts. It is perhaps surprising how little of either kind of research exists.

One might compare education in different countries on these points:

(1) Is educational activity more coordinated in countries vesting central educational administrations with the authority of expertise (or of office)? Is it more standardized?

(2) Is the adaptiveness of educational organizations to societal definitions (or faddishness) lower under such conditions?

(3) Under what societal conditions do systems of inspection and coordination of educational activity develop? Do such systems lower the variation in actual student learning?

The following issues are some that might be raised in comparing educational organizations with other organizations in the United States:

(1) Are schools less substantively coordinated, for better or worse, than other agencies (e.g., the military, or business firms) managing similar instructional activity?

(2) Are schools more inclined to adopt similar organizational forms than other types of organizations?

(3) Do educational organizations devote more coordinative effort to the environment, and less to internal activity, than other types of organizations?

Despite the obvious need for comparative research on educational organizations, we may be skeptical whether it will actually develop. Funding agencies are oriented to research within their domains, not comparing their domains with others. The past orientations of American funding agencies for educational research, which tend to take this line, may partly account for the striking absence of much research comparing school organizations in different countries or comparing organizational forms in different institutional sectors.

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